



## UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

### Felsted & Stebbing Ward

District Councillors Sandi Merifield & John Evans



### DISTRICT COUNCILLORS' REPORT: SEPTEMBER 2022

Cllrs Sandi Merifield and John Evans are pleased to present their Monthly Report to the Parish Council.

We hope that you have enjoyed and benefited from a Summer break last month and we are glad to be back at the beginning of "Autumn Term" (as it were) although we have continued during August to attend our regular/standing commitments (including Planning Committee Meetings in the case of Sandi and Portfolio Meetings for John with Local Plan Steering Group workshops and briefings for both of us).

However, there is not a great deal of new matters and activities upon which we are able to report this month, given that August is a quiet month in general.

### UDC PLANNING DEPARTMENT – FUNCTIONS, NEWS AND TOPICAL ISSUES

As you know, one of the significant challenges faced by UDC is the **quality of the "service"** provided by the Planning Department to residents and others making planning applications and in respect of enforcement of planning obligations or breaches of planning permissions. Some of these challenges and indeed concerns expressed to us by you and our residents arise out of the availability (in terms of headcount) of officers. This is not particular nor unique to Uttlesford.

The **planning profession nationwide**, is under-resourced in terms of the number of persons coming into it and local authorities in particular are experiencing especial difficulties in attracting and importantly, retaining suitably qualified personnel. The difficulty has been exacerbated post COVID in that remote working is common place, even universal, enabling officers who formerly would have travelled in to work at the UDC offices in Saffron Walden are now able to offer themselves as available to work remotely for local authorities and private practices who might be located some distance away from their homes and in the case of London LPAs and planning practices for higher salaries.

Accordingly, some **permanent officer posts** are currently vacant (being filled by temporary arrangement) and there is a drive to reprofile those positions and terms with a view to recruiting and retaining

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personnel. Our recently appointed Director of Planning (who it will be recalled has local knowledge and experience – having previously worked for Southend and Chelmsford LPAs) is seeking to meet this challenge.

A **recruitment campaign** is planned for the end of September and will cover some ten vacant and new posts across Development Management, Planning Policy and Planning Enforcement and also see the creation of a dedicated Strategic Applications Team which will specialise in managing major applications, appeals and pre-application advice.

On a practical level, and in a move to clear the “**back log of work**”, during the week commencing 8 August 2022, and with communications first put out to stakeholders, the Development Management and Enforcement Teams “locked-down” for a week to focus on clearing some of the cases that had built up. A total of 143 delegated planning decisions (approval or refusal) were taken in that week, 41 enforcement cases were decided (either closed or taken forward for formal action). That proved worthwhile and by comparison, in the w/c 2 August 2021 the figures were 51 and 1 respectively while the weekly average (mean) for planning decisions is approximately 66. It may be seen that the Department has a relentless level of work and needs to be staffed properly, as to which budgets have been made available for the purpose.

Historically, there have been concerns expressed in some quarters regarding the effectiveness on larger developments of **section 106 Agreements**. UDC now has a Draft s106 Planning Obligation guidance which was approved by Cabinet in March 2022 for public consultation. It is a very valuable operational document and will be used to support the negotiation of s106 agreements. Consultation is to be scheduled so as not to conflict with the Reg 18 Local Plan Consultation.

As to the monitoring of such section 106 obligations, a new database has been set up and is currently being populated by external consultants with existing S106 data. Once all data is in place (expected by the end of October 2022) an online and searchable database will be available to officers, Members and residents allowing for interrogation of all aspects of planning obligations.

**Planning Enforcement** has proved problematic on occasion and work to make the Enforcement Register compliant with legal requirements is continuing. The scale of this task is significant, bearing in mind the Enforcement Team is a team of only three officers but work started in February 2022 and is now expected to be completed by the end of September 2022.

A new notification process for Ward Members, Parish and Town Council/s commenced on 23 May 2022. The notification process is being used to alert Ward members, Parish and Town Council/s to investigations of potential breaches of planning in their area.

Finally, a **Member Training Programme** has been developed with the Planning Committee Working Group (PCWG) chaired by Sandi. This includes several key topics which Members have identified. ‘Teachings’ (training sessions) are being set up from September. The draft training programme includes 20 hours of

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available Member training over the course of the remainder of the municipal year. The PCWG agreed that much of this could be delivered virtually.

**Significantly, planning leads from Parish Councils will also be invited to attend where appropriate and we are sure that this opportunity will be regarded as useful.**

### **UDC HOUSING STOCK**

You will have received a letter recently from the UDC Chief Executive advising that it is believed it may be in breach of the “**Home Standard**”, with reference to its obligations under health and safety legislation and regulations regarding its tenanted housing stock.

A decision was taken to self-refer this concern to the relevant regulator as there was no full confidence that all the required health and safety compliance checks were historically being carried out to the entire 2800 homes owned and managed by UDC. In April 2020, UDC formed a joint venture partnership with Norse Commercial Services Ltd (owned 100 % by Norfolk County Council). The new company, Uttlesford Norse Services Ltd (UNSL) provides a range of property and building maintenance services to the Council including responsive repairs, planned maintenance and capital improvement of its housing stock.

This includes ensuring that the required health and safety inspections and associated remedial works are carried out in relation to gas appliances, electrical installations, water hygiene, asbestos, lifting equipment and fire safety. Since the formation of the partnership vehicle, arrangements have been put in place for the council to monitor the management of statutory health and safety compliance. The Council does not currently have sufficient confidence that UNSL is uniformly meeting the required levels of compliance in terms of the health and safety inspections.

One example of this is the mandatory five-yearly checking of electrical systems which has very regrettably, not always occurred. Tenants have been advised of this development and where it affects their individual properties, they will be kept fully advised.

It might be useful to put these matters into further context. The Council spends approximately **£8 million** pa on repairs, maintenance and improvements to its council housing stock which is in addition to a further c. **£400,000** spent on other works for example, legionella and health checks in council premises and depots. The £8 million comes from the Housing Revenue Account, with only the £400,000 from the Council’s General Fund. This equates to over £2,500 for each council tenancy, or more than £50 per week every week for each and every rent payer.

It is the **single largest item of service expenditure in the Council** and while only a small proportion of that overall sum is spent on the **seven** key health and safety elements for council houses, nonetheless the current situation raises two questions; namely whether the expenditure level is sufficient to deliver the high standards demanded by Councillors, expected by the Regulator in the Home Standard, and required

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of landlords by law; and also of the **value for money** from that expenditure if that budget is sufficient but is demonstrated not to be delivering the results reasonably expected of it.

A detailed report on all these matters is being prepared and will be considered by the Housing Board and we will report further over the coming months.

## **PLANNING - THE LOCAL PLAN**

The Local Plan Leadership Group continues to meet by way of workshops and briefings received from officers and external consultants who are preparing the evidence base

### [Local Plan timetable - Uttlesford District Council](#)

#### **Key activity for the local plan**

1. Regulation 18 "Preferred Options" Local Plan will go to public consultation from 2 November to 12 December
2. Officers will then carry out further preparatory work before holding further meetings with governance groups ahead of publishing the Regulation 19 "Submission Draft" Local Plan for consultation in November and December 2023
3. Final preparatory work on the submission plan will happen in January and February 2024
4. The final draft of the plan, alongside the comments received from the Regulation 19 consultation, will be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for examination in May 2024
5. The council plans for adoption of the plan in March 2025

#### **Local Development Scheme**

The [Local Development Scheme \(LDS\) \(PDF\) \[584KB\]](#) is the timetable for the preparation of the Local Plan, highlighting key consultation events and other key stages. It was approved by Uttlesford District Council on 7 July 2022. It is the sixteenth LDS produced by the council. It replaces the previous LDS, dated 20 October 2020.

## **WATER MATTERS**

Given the high temperatures this Summer very many of us have become more than concerned about water usage levels and prospectively as to sufficient water availability in future. We live in the highest water stressed area of the country and have done for many years:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/998237/Water\\_stressed\\_areas\\_final\\_classification\\_2021.odt](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/998237/Water_stressed_areas_final_classification_2021.odt)

The Government estimates that the latest regional water resources plans suggest we will need an additional 4,000 million litres of water a day by 2050 and half of this will come from reducing demand for water. Accordingly, the growing population requires new housing that will enable people to use water in a **sustainable way** and as regards new housing development, it is likely that we shall adopt a minimum

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building standard of **110 litres per person per day** in all new builds – currently, the average usage in Affinity’s area of supply is **150 litres per person per day**. There are means of achieving this (using more efficient plumbing and storage systems as well as grey water recycling and rain water capture) set out in the “Housing: optional technical standards’ guidance and prescribed by regulation 36(2)(b) of the Building Regulations 2010”. Water companies further are mandating the installation of water meters where not currently installed and so the days of profligate water waste and garden sprinkler use might be limited.

### **UKRAINE REFUGEES**

As you are aware, matters concerning refugees from Ukraine are coordinated by Essex CC although UDC has specific additional responsibilities and functions to discharge concerning them as the “Port Authority” since very many arrive via Stansted Airport. The County have asked that the following information concerning be provided to our community (in case it has not been supplied directly to you as yet):

Key figures (County wide):

- 22 new sponsors were recorded between 18/08/22 and 25/08/22, bringing the total current number of sponsors to a total of **1166**.
- 28 new guests were recorded between 18/08/22 and 25/08/22, bringing the total current number of guests to **2643**.
- 56 new guest arrivals took place between 18/08/22 and 25/08/22, bringing the total current number of arrivals to **1604**.

ECC are surveying sponsors in respect of their intention to remain in the Homes for Ukraine scheme beyond the 6 month minimum period. The latest newsletter and the survey is below – a reminder email has also been issued this week.

[Homes for Ukraine sponsor newsletter 25 August 2022](#)

### **OUR ASSISTANCE AND MEMBERS’ INITIATIVE**

We have not been approached since our last report for any assistance which might be possible using funds jointly available from our UDC Councillors’ Initiative Allocation. As you know, we are always ready to consider requests for financial support for appropriate projects.

Of course, we would be very happy to hear from any parish councillors or residents and to meet them separately, whether at our Surgery held immediately before your Parish Council meeting or otherwise, should there be anything they think we can help with or answer any questions.

Cllr Sandi Merifield

Cllr John Evans

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